

Captain John Lowe, Jr., House  
620 Southard Street  
Key West  
Monroe County  
Florida

HABS No. FL-181

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FLA,  
44-KEY,  
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PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

## HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

HABS No. FLA-181

## CAPTAIN JOHN LOWE, JR., HOUSE

Location: 620 Southard Street, Key West, Monroe County, Florida.

USGS Key West Quadrangle, Universal Transverse  
Mercator Coordinates: 17.418960. 2715810.

Present Owner  
and Occupant: Mr. and Mrs. Laurence B. Nettles.

Present Use: Residence.

Significance: This building is typical of the mid-nineteenth century houses built by successful Key West mariners. It is one of the few such houses still standing.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

## A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1857-1867.
2. Architect: None.
3. Original and subsequent owners: Pardon C. Greene's heirs sold this property consisting of all of Lot 2, Square 60, to John Lowe, Jr., November 28, 1855 (Deed Book E, p. 738). Lowe in 1917 deeded his house and this property to his son Stephen F. Lowe (Deed Book A-3, p. 151). Grace Lowe, widow of Stephen F. Lowe, sold the house and part of the lot to Joseph Y. Porter, Jr., in 1945 (Deed Book G-19, p. 282). Dr. Porter used the building as his residence and hospital until 1954, when he and his wife sold it to the organization known as the Service Men's Christian Center (Deed Book G-75, p. 497-498). In 1962 it was sold to the Florida Gospel Pioneers (Monroe County Courthouse Records 261 p. 577-578) who continued to use it for a Service Men's Center until January 28, 1965, when it was purchased from that organization by L.B. and Judith Nettles (Monroe County Courthouse Records 333, p. 1).
4. Original plans and construction: A two-and-a-half story rectangular block with a single-story rear wing. The building is wood frame with intersecting gable roofs. A

two-story gallery on the front and sides also covered part of the rear. The building was constructed by ships' carpenters with dowel pins and steel braces.

5. Alterations and additions: It appears that the building was gradually enlarged over a period of time after its original construction. The Sanborn Map of Key West of 1889 shows that the porches extended onto the rear and two sections of the "L" rooms were originally one story. The map of 1892 shows only one room in the rear and porches on both sides. By the time of the 1912 Sanborn Map a second story had been added to the rear wing. The 1899 map designates a fourth story cupola or widow's walk. This was at one time enclosed, but after the hurricane of 1919 it was simplified and reduced to a low open widow's walk.

After the house was purchased by Dr. Porter in 1945, it was converted into a private hospital and part of the northeast porch enclosed for a bath. Both open porches of the rear wing were also enclosed at that time.

As a servicemen's center the building was again altered. At the second floor level the southeast section of the porch was enclosed to form a bathroom and storage space. The second floor was remodeled to serve as apartments.

B. Historical Events and Persons Connected with the Structure:

John Lowe, Jr., (1833-1917), who built the house, was a native of Key West. His parents were originally from the Bahama Islands. As a child he went to sea with his father, a wrecking master and sea captain. When he was only thirteen, he was granted a shipmaster license, but shortly thereafter went to work for his brother-in-law, William Curry, the island's first millionaire.

Although he had little schooling, he quickly learned business methods. Later, he went into business for himself and opened a store. His knowledge of the sea led to his operating and owning a large sponge fleet and other vessels which traded in lumber and fruit. Of his ships, two were famous, the "Magic" and the "Rollan Sanford." His son, Stephen F., continued in the business after his father's death.

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Mr. Lowe's daughter Emma is said to have been courted by Robert Edwin Peary during his stay at Key West in 1882.

In 1935 the house was rented to Julius Stone, Administrator of Florida's Emergency Relief Administration, who entertained many prominent "New Deal" officials, writers, etc., who came to see the experimental rehabilitation program in Key West.

C. Sources of Information:

1. Old views: Sanborn Maps of Key West, Florida, 1889, 1892, 1899, and 1912. Sanborn Map and Publishing Co., New York.

2. Bibliography:

- a. Primary and unpublished sources:

Monroe County Courthouse Records and Deed Books, County Clerk's Office, Key West, Florida.

Monroe Land Title Company Abstract Key West, Florida.

- b. Secondary and unpublished sources:

Chapman, George M., Florida, 1513-1913, Past, Present and Future, S.J. Clark Publishing Co., Chicago, 1914, 2 vols. p. 65, 267.

Florida, "At the East Coast" edited and published by the Miami Herald, Miami, Florida, ca. 1925.

Rerick, Rowland H., Memories of Florida, Vol. II, The Southern Historical Association, Atlanta, 1902, p. 598.

- c. Interviews:

Moreno, B.C. (deceased 1967) whose home for 70 years is immediately adjacent to the Captain John Lowe, Jr., house. Interviews 1960-66.

Prepared by Betty M. Bruce  
Old Island Restoration  
Foundation, Inc.  
Project Historian  
HABS Key West Project  
September, 1967

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION:

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The house has features of the Classical Revival style as well as characteristics associated with island architecture and shipbuilding techniques evident in its proportions, trim and construction.
2. Condition of fabric: Generally good.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: A two-story rectangular block with a two-story rear addition flanked by two single-story additions. The building is five bays across the facade, and measures 54'-9 1/2" x 62'-2".
2. Foundation: Brick and limestone piers, wood posts, vertical slat lattice at front and sides.
3. Wall construction: Horizontal wood siding averaging 4 1/2" to 5 1/2", flush joints at all porch elevations, baseboard and pilasters with capitals at second floor porch ceiling at southwest (front) elevation only; horizontal wood siding, lapped joints averaging 5 1/2" exposure.
4. Structural system: Wood frame, 4" x 4" studs, 4" x 14" floor joists run at the long dimension on the second floor level; 8" x 8" and 3 1/2" x 5 1/2" beams, 3 1/2" x 5 1/2" joists; mortise and tenon joinery, tree nail fasteners.
5. Porches: Porches on front and sides at first and second floor levels (partly closed in at north corner, second floor); 8" square solid wood columns continue from first floor to entablature, plinth, composite molded capital; tenon joints between peripheral porch beams and columns, dowel fasteners; wood balustrades, molded rail top and bottom appear continuous through columns, tapered turned balusters; sections of balustrade removed northwest elevation and east corner first floor; ceiling of first-floor porch exposed framing of second floor, ceiling of second-floor porch front sheathed and follows slope of roof to accommodate third-floor windows. Steps are of wood; front steps have balustrade with square newels, molded finial.

6. Chimney: Single brick chimney to serve kitchen in rear wing; thimble opening at kitchen interior, corbeled capital.

7. Openings:

a. Doorways and doors: Front doorway on first floor porch; classic surround of pilasters, flat molded entablature and boxed cornice, six-panel door (modern); shutters removed but pintles remain at jambs, modern screen door. Second floor doorway similar to that on first floor but has fine detail; two wood louver shutters hung at jambs to wing out; modern glazed door. Miscellaneous modern doors, simple trim at other openings.

b. Windows and shutters: Six-over-six-light double hung sash, insect screen panel fills full opening; two two-panel operating wood louvered shutters per opening, hung at jambs, spring latches. Windows at third floor porch facade are in-swinging casements, three panes per sash, balustrade in each window, shutter pintles remain. Miscellaneous windows: Variety of modern sash, jalousies, etc.

8. Roof:

a. Shape, covering: Gable roof on main section and rear addition, shed roofs over shed additions; terne sheet metal shingle covering.

b. Cornice eaves: Boxed eaves, molded wood cornice, flat sheet metal gutter, metal downspouts.

c. Dormers, cupolas: Two dormers at southeast elevation, lapped horizontal siding, metal louvers in opening, sheet metal shingles on gable roof; fragment of cupola at center of house roof, horizontal lapped wood siding, corner boards, wood balustrade, now serves as widow's walk.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans:

a. First floor: Porch at northwest (front) and sides: central hall plan, entry stair hall, living room to the right, study and dining room to the left; room, kitchen and play room and storage (former porches) at rear of stair hall; stairway from rear of stair hall to second floor, closet under stairway.

- b. Second floor: Stair hall to bedrooms each side, rear of stair hall to bedrooms in rear addition, stairway to third floor.
- c. Third floor: Bedroom each side of stair hall, stairway from rear of stair hall to floor of cupola, with ladder to roof.
- 2. Stairways: Straight run stairway, back to front; 7 11/16" risers, 10 3/4" treads, two turned balusters per tread, continuous carved handrail from turned newel at first floor to intersection with roof of cupola.
- 3. Flooring: Wood strips 3 1/2" in width painted or varnished; carpeting and plastic floor covering.
- 4. Wall and ceiling finish: Horizontal 3 1/2" siding, flush joints, paper over siding in first floor rooms; baseboard and composite molded cornice.
- 5. Doorways and doors: Four panel wood doors throughout with miscellaneous modern replacements, simple heavy molding at surrounds. Wood thresholds.
- 6. Decorative features: The interior and exterior of this building are extremely simple, with variety dependent on balustrades and fenestration.
- 7. Notable hardware: Porcelain door knobs, key hole covers, shutter spring latches.

D. Site:

- 1. General setting and orientation: The building faces northwest on Southard Street. A modern wood picket fence with concrete posts runs at the sidewalk line; there is informal planting.
- 2. Outbuildings: An outbuilding to the east is a four-room wood frame cottage, gable roof, board and batten finish. Abandoned septic tank, two rectangular cisterns (approximately 12' deep) under play room. Wells penetrate through both cisterns, ruins of concrete walls at southeast side of building.

Prepared by F. Blair Reeves AIA  
Supervisory Architect  
HABS Key West Project  
September 1967

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

These records were prepared in 1967 during a summer project jointly sponsored by the Old Island Restoration Foundation, Inc. of Key West, and the Historic American Buildings Survey. Twenty-two structures were recorded, ranging from commercial structures, residences and hospitals to a convent, a lighthouse, and the Memorial to the Victims of the Disaster of the U.S. Battleship Maine.

The project was under the direction of F. Blair Reeves, AIA, Associate Professor, Department of Architecture, University of Florida. Measured drawings were prepared by student architects John D. Davenport and John F. Grimm of Texas A. and M. University, and John O. Crosby of the University of Florida. Mrs. Betty M. Bruce of the Old Island Restoration Foundation, Inc., and Professor Reeves were responsible for the historical and architectural data. They were assisted by members of the Foundation. J. Franks Brooks, Photographer, of Key West, supplied the photographs.